PURPLE DON'T THINK CLASSICS ARE A GAS, ANYMORE . . .

DEEP PURPLE (from left, back) Roger Glover, Ian Gillan; (front) Richie Blackmore, Ian Paice, Jon Lord.

DEEP PURPLE have suddenly reached the highest point in their three-year history, with an album and a single high in their respective charts. They now have the success and recognition that they deserve.

They're a complete group; fine musicians who don't forget that as well as being "in music" they are also part of show business. Though some of their recent antics have met with heated criticism, it's worth noting that there has been a lot more dissent from fans recently about the groups who "just stand there." Purple certainly don't let you feel that you are intruding on a private jam session when they are on stage. They actually address the audience and remember that you have paid to see, not just hear.

They are also well established in the pop-classical fusion scene, which has earned them a lot of respect.

It is now over a year since singer Ian Gillan and bass player Roger Glover joined the group and they've hardly looked back since.

"It was a very difficult thing telling Rod, and Nick, our old singer and bass player that they weren't doing what we wanted," says organist Jon Lord. "We were all good friends but we had to do it for the good of the group. We lost six months, musically, because of the change, but those six months changed the group for the better; it was a worthwhile thing. Although, at the time, I thought we'd never get off the ground again."

. . . except Jon Lord who has only just begun . . .

Although Deep Purple had a hit single in the American charts, "Black Night" is their first 45 success here, one they weren't quite prepared for. It was out nearly three months before it started moving. Says Jon: "It's the first time we've gone into a studio to make a single. The ones before have all been off albums. We thought it would be nice to do one that wasn't on the album.

"I suppose we wanted a hit. It's difficult to work out. I just thought that it wouldn't matter if it wasn't a hit and if it was that it would be nice. But I must say, having got it, it's a great feeling, especially to be in both charts at once."

Jon feels that the thing about having a hit single is not to rush another one out straight away. "Black Night" came naturally and they are content to wait for the next one to come along like that.

The group is writing material for the next album and so far they have nine or ten numbers, already enough. "We will want about ten tracks on the next one. They will be shorter so that there will be more variety. Solos will be shorter because the big solo thing doesn't come off on record, it's more of a live thing."

Direction is in rock

The next LP might be out at Christmas. But a lot depends on when they can find recording time in their date sheet, packed with gigs in Britain and Europe. "Deep Purple In Rock" itself is probably the most significant landmark to the group. "We were searching for a group identity. Our previous LPs had been a mess of different styles. And it was also the first one with Roger and Ian on. It's the only one we've made with a strong direction. On the next one we'll use what we have learned from this one and progress from there. We just want it to be a natural development from 'In Rock'."

Purple's direction now seems to be very much in rock which, as a unit, is where their strength lies. And Jon says that now they have found this direction they will work within its limitations. But this doesn't mean that there is a lack of scope. A lot of brilliant music, he points out, was written to the strict regimentation of classical symphonies. Purple will, no doubt, extend rock to its furthest possibilities.

Deep Purple's performances with classical orchestras might be over, but Lord's orchestral writing certainly isn't.

"It was a bee in my bonnet; the rest of the group were kind enough to indulge. The Concerto did us so much good at the time. It was a worthwhile thing. The latest one, The Gemini Suite, we were asked to do. And it's not every day you get asked by the BBC to do something like that. But, as a group, we have decided not to do any more for the time being. Although we might feel like it in a year's time. I don't know. It's not Ritchie's scene.

"But I have written things for orchestra that I'd like to get performed, that's my eventual aim. I'd like to write an organ concerto for Keith Emerson. We did talk about it about six months ago but we didn't have the time.

"We did think about doing a double album—the Nice with an orchestra on one, and us with another orchestra on the other. But the financial problems would have been ridiculous. But I'd certainly like to write something for him—his technique seems to have no limits, but it would be just him and an orchestra, no group.

Classics for Emerson, Lord and orchestra

"The possibilities of rock musicians playing with classical orchestras haven't been explored. The techniques are totally different but both as fine and as marvellous in their own way. I see no reason why they shouldn't be explored.

"I have been asked by the people at the BBC to write something else, to do whatever I want. I don't know what I want to do but I've got till next June. I want to talk to Keith about it. I'd love to play piano with an orchestra. Perhaps it could be Keith on organ, me on piano, and an orchestra. There will be about four or five movements and we could swop over in the middle. It would be great to write.

"These sort of things must be exciting. I don't think it is any good if they are cerebral, intellectual and deep. They must be fun."

There are certainly a lot of difficulties about getting groups and orchestras on stage together. The Gemini Suite had only two rehearsals. Hardly enough, but 70 musicians cost £700 for a three-hour session. And of the success of such fusions Jon says: "I've tried twice and they're not compatible."

As for Deep Purple, their sounds are going to be expanded by the introduction of an electric piano for some numbers. Lord feels he has gone as far as he can go on organ and wants to "renew" himself by returning to more of a piano feel. It's also likely that the noise and violence which usually ends their acts will continue. They aim to be a visual experience and he thinks it is justified if backed-up by musical integrity.

He sums it up best by quoting Mick Jagger—"If you are not going to move about on stage, you might as well play behind a curtain."

Roy Shipston